

Science Fiction on the Internet

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If I haven't got my head in a computer I'm either asleep, or playing football, or watching football (Arsenal actually). When I'm on the PC it's usually something to do with the Internet, and that's only partly because British Airways pay me to do so as an Internet consultant. Nice work if you can get it, although my girlfriend keeps mumbling something about getting a real life.

What I'd like to do in this article is to give you a feel for science fiction on the Net. There's too much to do a general survey, and it would take too much space if I gave detailed reviews of a number of resources, so I've dipped in here and there. I'd feel I've achieved something if, having read this, some of you think that maybe there's something in it for you and you ask "where do I go for a Net connection?"

I tear myself away from the PC at least once a week for a dose of real life called *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I've heard about *Star Trek: Voyager*, and I'm very keen to see some of it, so I decided to use the Net to find out more.

A local phone call connects me to the Internet, and other than the cost of the call and a monthly subscription of £10 plus VAT there are usually no additional charges for accessing information on the Net. All of the resources described in this article are free.

The reason for the explosive growth in awareness of the Net over the last couple of years is the World Wide Web. The Internet itself is hardware – computers and comms links – and the Web is one of the applications that runs on it. On the Web you jump from one page of text to another by clicking on keywords, and it also incorporates pictures, video and sound. In my search for *Voyager* I accessed Lycos, which is a US-based database of Web sites. Each site on the Web has an address, called a URL, which stands for uniform

resource locator. the URL for Lycos is <http://www.lycos.com>.

At the Lycos search form I typed in the words "star trek voyager," and pressed enter. ten seconds later I was on the official Paramount site for *Star Trek: Voyager* (<http://voyager.paramount.com/VoyagerIntro.html>). First stop was sick bay – at least, there's a picture and text that tell me I'm in sick bay. From here I downloaded a video which contained a message from the emergency holographic doctor. He explains that the reason I know nothing about *Voyager* is because I've lost my memory. If I look around the site I'll recover all my lost knowledge, and can look forward to a return to active duty once I complete the questionnaire provided on the site. On another page there's a list of real people who have passed the test.

The site itself is quite good, although I didn't feel that I came away with much of a feel for the characters, which is really what it's about. The biogs of the main characters (including pictures) are rather brief. There is a nice picture of the starship, although in the crew photo I can't tell if one of the characters is a woman with a distinctive hairstyle, or an alien with a funny head. The list of TV stations showing the programme didn't help much – they're all in the US!

Another Internet application is the newsgroups, although the name is misleading. They are actually text-based discussion forums on a mind-boggling array of subjects – there are over 15,000 of them! I've been a fan of Douglas Adams since the original *Hitch Hiker's* radio series, and one of my best-ever theatre experiences was a superb adaptation of this in a small Welsh theatre. In my humble opinion the *Dirk Gently* novels are some of the most brilliant imaginative fiction ever written. Anyway, what's Adams up to these days? Well, I happen to know that he's getting into digital

media, but that's another story. A good source of information is the newsgroup about him. There are also newsgroups for many other writers (science fiction and otherwise), and TV programmes, and film genres, and psychology support groups, and philosophies, and religions, and sports, and... well, lots of things.

In general, anyone with a Net connection can read and contribute to the newsgroups. Within each newsgroup there are usually a number of parallel debates, and alt.fan.douglas-adams (that's the name of the newsgroup) was no exception. For a start there is some enormously detailed technical debate about the more obscure elements of his work, but of more interest to me was the fact that *The Salmon of Doubt* may be out some time this year. It was due to be a Dirk Gently novel, but Adams was having trouble with it, and wrote out Dirk Gently. There may be a Gently TV series, and Steven Spielberg might have the rights to a *Hitch Hiker's* movie. You can also get Adams's e-mail address.

The oddest things spring up in these debates. In *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* there is a joke about how "belgium" is the rudest word in the universe. I found out that in the US version the word "belgium" is replaced with "fuck." Cor blimey, Mum. There is a lengthy debate about whether this is, or is not, a good thing, incorporating references to the nature of Americans and their sense of humour. The benefit of this sort of forum is that we get to hear (read) both sides of the story.

But science fiction on the Net isn't all *Star Trek* and candy floss. All (well, probably) tastes are catered for. Off to another of my favourite search engines – Alta Vista at <http://www.altavista.digital.com/> – and type in J.G. Ballard. At <http://www.cnw.com/~miki/index.html> there is "What I Believe" by Ballard. I've read some of his work, but I'm no expert, so I'm not

I could write something much closer to what I wanted to write. But, funnily enough, writing within the genre conventions is good discipline.

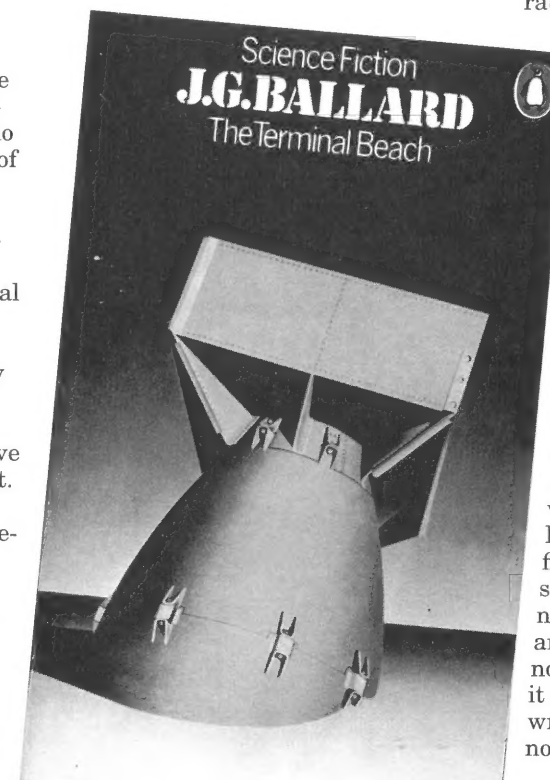
You're not the first writer to have mixed feelings about sf as a genre. H.G. Wells was approached by the early sf magazines, by editors like Gernsback, but he brushed them off.

Yes, I'm sure. I don't have reservations of that sort about genre sf, because I used to write it myself. I've always been proud to be called a science-fiction writer because I really do believe that sf is the true literature of our day. All I would say ... it sounds silly, but in a way the trouble with science fiction is that the wrong people have written it. It has largely been written by American commercial writers who weren't interested in expanding the possibilities of the genre at all; quite the opposite. They were like a successful small family business that doesn't replace its machinery because it happens to have a monopoly of its self-defined market. Some little firm in Yorkshire that makes a special kind of biscuit or fire-extinguisher which is successfully exported all over the world – why change it? Go on cranking out these rather dull biscuits or not very efficient fire-extinguishers as long as you can sell them, even though the actual market for these products is comparatively small. It's very difficult to shake a long-established small business that has turned its back on change, very difficult to shake it from its complacency. Genre sf was rather like that. But it's an historical accident. The problem is that most people from a literary background have no training in science whatsoever and have never been interested in science, or even in popularized science, which is really the subject matter of sf. There are very few English literary figures who've been interested in science, in the way that, say, Aldous Huxley was – Huxley was intensely interested, Auden I think too. If you read Auden's poetry, in particular the plays he wrote with Isherwood, they're filled with scientific imagery of all kinds.

Talking of science, someone pointed out recently that in the 1960s you wrote a lot of short reviews of scientific books in the journal Chemistry and Industry...

I went semi-freelance in something like 1961, when I'd been working at *Chemistry and Industry* for about three years. I went in on a two-day-a-week basis, and all those reviews were written in the office. They weren't reviews comparable to the ones that I've written since; they

were just notices that summarized recent books. They were merely reviews written from the blurbs – because the blurbs on these scientific textbooks are good, you know. So none of them was paid for, and none of them was in any sense a literary effort except, I think, for one on a book about dreams, where I felt free to offer my own opinions.



Continuing to work in that area, if only part time, having these books pass through your hands, you must have been reading a fair amount of science and technology, up until 1964 at least. Did that serve to "ground" your imagination at that time?

Of course. Remember, I read medicine for a couple of years, and at school I'd taken the then-equivalent of A-levels in science subjects. When I went to work at *Chemistry and Industry* I already had this science background, and as I've said elsewhere the offices of a scientific magazine are a wonderful information crossroads because every scientific organization in the world remotely connected to the subject in hand bombards you with a stream of publications, newsletters, leaflets, brochures, reports of conferences. I just devoured this material, it was wonderful ... because *Chemistry and Industry* covered everything from the pharmaceutical field to nuclear science. The material that arrived, which I would scan as a matter of routine, looking for news items, was rich in a hundred and one subjects. But what I think of as the biggest change in my fiction is the fact that

I've stopped writing short stories, simply because there isn't really a market any more. Most magazines – yours is a rare exception – don't want fiction over 3,000 words. I hardly ever wrote a short story in less than 5,000 words, and many of mine were in the 7,000-to-10,000 range, where you begin to get the dimensions of a novel, or of a much longer sort of narrative. It's a long time since I wrote a 10,000-word short story; the market for those, as far as I know, is non-existent now. It means that I've no alternative, really, to writing novels; and of course many of these novels that I've written recently would have been long short stories 20 or 30 years ago. I think *Rushing to Paradise* would probably have been a long short story, slightly reminiscent of ... what was that one set in the Amazon jungles? "A Question of Re-Entry" ... vaguely reminiscent of that, a similar sort of central character (a man in the case of the short story). I think my river novel, *The Day of Creation*, would have been a long short story. It's possible that the novel I've just finished now would have been a short story. I don't mean that these novels aren't authentic novels – they are, clearly – but I didn't write many novels, really, until 1970. I'd been at it for quite a while, but I think I'd written three novels by 1970 – three novels in 15 years...

Four, if you count The Wind from Nowhere!

Well, we'll leave that out: that *should* have been done as a short story! The writer has to work within the constraints and conventions imposed upon him. The death of the short-story market is something I regret. I always felt I had a bit of a flair for short stories.

I think you overstate the death of the short-story market. Brian Aldiss, for example, has had a couple of short-story collections out lately. If you look at the credits, his stories appear all over the place – original anthologies, strange magazines...

Has he? Good for him. How is he, by the way? Is he well?

Very well, when I saw him in August, at the World SF Convention in Glasgow.

That's good, because he's 70 now, isn't he? That's excellent. I was terribly sorry to hear about John Brunner's death – that must have been a shock for everybody, including his wife, poor woman... Of course, he was much younger than Brian; he was younger than I am. A stroke – tragic. I get the